

'No' may not be in his vocabulary

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IF THERE IS a heaven on Earth for politicians, George Bush found it Thursday at a Catholic high school in Middle Village, Queens. In the gymnasium waited almost 2,000 polite students, each waving an American flag; placards bobbed in the aisles—"Beat Crime. Vote Bush;" an ocean of men in blue rimmed the podium, providing an envious backdrop; on the platform in a wheelchair sat a genuine hero, Steven D. McDonald, and the father of a martyred cop, Edward R. Byrne. Before the vice president uttered a word, he received the endorsement of the city's police unions as well as the badge of Matthew Byrne's dead son.

Bush's speech attacked weakness in the war on crime and drugs. At one point, he borrowed a rhetorical device used by Jesse Jackson. Just Say No, he beseeched the students of Christ the King High School. No to drugs. No to crime. No to "liberal" judges. No to Michael Dukakis.

"Your war is right here at home. It starts before you're 18. I'm talking, of course, about drugs. Michael Jackson says, 'The man in the mirror can make a change.' You may have heard the term, 'enabling behavior.' What other people do to make you think it's OK to use drugs... Do you step up and say, 'We care. You gotta stop.'... It's doubly hard for you to push them away and say, 'No.'"

"No more rhetoric" on drugs and crime, promised Bush.

The Republican candidate for President talks tough, and the students like that. They approved of his campaign's tough talk about criminals, about defense, about the Soviets. Anthony Falce, 17, of Brooklyn, said he likes Bush's firm talk, and not just in favor of the death penalty: "I like Bush because I don't think there should be a cutback on defense because it would lead to an inferiority complex on the part of the people because the Russians would get an advantage."

But although Bush talks tough, his public career does not demonstrate a willingness to say no to powerful people or constituencies. Of the vice president's passive role on the trading of arms to Iran for American hostages, both the Reagan-appointed Tower Commission and a joint congressional committee found that Bush failed to say no or even speak up. As for "voodoo economics," Bush demonstrated what might be deemed "enabling behavior" in going along with his "hero," as he referred to Reagan in the second debate with Dukakis. The same behavior was evident in Bush's flip-flopping on abortion and the ERA.

BUSH HAS PANDERED to the public in this campaign by vowing never to raise taxes, a promise the next President cannot keep. He placated special interests when he chaired a Reagan task force that lessened regulations on industrial polluters, on free-wheeling savings and loan banks, on Wall Street insiders. When he headed the Republican National Committee during Watergate, Bush was one of Richard Nixon's staunchest defenders. It wasn't until the day before Nixon resigned that Bush urged him to step down—in a private letter. When serving as CIA director in the Ford administration, Bush often refused to say yes or no, seemingly fearing to step between the polar positions taken by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Reviewing Bush's public career—

congressman, GOP national chairman, ambassador to the UN, envoy to China, director of the CIA, vice president and candidate for President—John Podesta observes: "I can't come up with a single example of where he's said no." This might be considered harsh, especially since Podesta is Michael Dukakis' director of research. But aside from the time in 1968 when Congressman Bush supported a fair-housing bill that angered his Texas constituents, the examples cited by members of Bush's own staff are pretty slim.

Bush's deputy campaign manager and national political director, Rich Bond, was asked to offer examples of when Bush said no. Bond came up with three: "When he was national chairman, he was defending a very unpopular President at the time." Second, "he got shelled" in 1982 when he defended Reagan policies that induced a recession. Finally, "Iowa this year was no fun either," as Bush spoke for the administration's unpopular farm policies. Each is more a profile in loyalty than courage, for in a sense Bush was just carrying out orders.

Admittedly, the Dukakis people also have difficulty discovering examples of where the Massachusetts governor has stood up and said no. But the citations, including his opposition to the popular death penalty and his refusal to close the door on new federal taxes, are more plentiful. Of equal relevance, both in this campaign and as governor for 10 years, Dukakis has demonstrated a personal toughness alien to Bush.

The vice president may well be a nicer man, and he has many more friends to offer testimonials to his generous traits. But he is too eager to please—demeaning himself by conducting a vulgar campaign, by altering his personality, by switching positions. The Michael Dukakis who has proved not to be very "likable" is also a man stubborn and perhaps strong enough to do it his way.

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Why is this relevant to the election? Because the next President will waltz into office and rudely crash into a brick policy wall. He will have to narrow the budget gap, pinching such popular entitlements as Medicare, while simultaneously unearthing more money to bail out bankrupt savings and loan institutions or to stem nuclear waste leaks. The nature of these issues will drive whomever is President to a similar posture, midway between cutting the budget and raising taxes. The role of ideological positions—on the death penalty, for instance—will take a back seat to this new reality.

THEREFORE, THE MOST important qualities sought in the next President are not ideological but personal. It will require personal political skills, a talent where Bush bests his Democratic rival. But the task will also require an analytical toughness and the strength of character to say no to both powerful interests and to the public. Both of these qualities have too rarely been displayed throughout George Bush's public career. ~~Bush can talk tough, as he did in Queens, but that is not to be confused with acting tough.~~